

James Landis

The Den

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I watched her house rush by as we passed it on the way to the interstate. I couldn't read the cursive rusted iron number seven with a chip in the second 'e' that I knew hung over the front porch, nor could I see through the bushes to the deck that we used to sit on and watch the sun set every night, but I wish I hadn't looked back. She made me in hurry to get away, and the tainted memories that even this passing glimpse of the house had evoked only slowed me down.

"Our friendship just feels natural," she almost whispered into the phone, trying not to wake her parents in the next room. I calmly moved the phone to my less tired ear and re-adjusted the sheets, feeling their coolness on my bare skin. A warm night breeze stirred the still early spring air, bringing attention to the silence in our conversation and underscoring its serenity. We share silences well, I thought to myself, and remembered when they used to be awkward and how we soon discovered their importance. I turned my head to look at the dim digital clock on my night stand, the only light in the room. I was not anxious to get to sleep, just curious about what was happening in the world outside the one that we shared through the phone line. I focused my eyes just enough to read 3:44 and allowed the deep red light to become a formless blur again. I returned to our world.

"I love our silences," I didn't need to say. I once tried to explain to her that you can't say anything with words, but I couldn't make her understand. She appreciated silence, probably even more than me, but there were no words to describe why sometimes there are just no words to describe things. I let my mind float from my house to hers, following the path that we had walked the night before. I saw her sprawled on the couch in the den upstairs in the dark, half out of her work clothes (she never did get that phone line in her room). I heard the noise of the occasional passing car on State Route 48 just outside her window and watched as the reflected headlights traveled across the slats in her venetian blinds and the shadows marched regularly across the floor and up over the couch.

"Whatcha thinkin'?" She always said these two words with the same intonation. "Nuthin'."

always came my response. I was suddenly back in my own room, feeling a little like I had intruded on something, interrupting the spirituality of our ritualistic Saturday night after-work phone conversation with something physical and animalistic. But as we talked the feeling faded.

The light from the TV danced on the walls of the den. I squeezed my left hand slightly and she loosened her grip, understanding. Our hands cooled slightly in the late spring air as the moisture evaporated from between them. I turned my hand and locked my fingers with hers, stroking the back of her hand with my thumb. Neither of us ever had homework after school anymore. I was a Senior and she was taking easy classes her Junior year. We had run into our principal at the movie store up the street that night, but we didn't need to make any excuses even though it was a Thursday. I knew I was graduating soon.

"I don't know about this," she said suddenly, interrupting the movie. She had pulled my hand across her body and was squeezing it tightly between both of hers. I turned and looked into her eyes. I felt her fear in her hands, and she read pain in my eyes. I knew she had decided. Two weeks earlier we had crossed the boundary of our friendship and now she had decided she wanted to go back. I stared into her eyes just long enough for her to know I didn't want us to go back, and silently returned my gaze to the TV. Our hands stayed locked for the rest of the movie, neither of us wanting to let go. She knew I was graduating soon, too.

"Why can't you be my friend like you were before!" she yelled angrily into the phone. I shivered despite the late summer heat, flooded with anger and pain. I crossed my arms across my chest. I wish I had an answer. These fights had become too common. I hated the thought of going to college. College was the reason we were having this fight. If I didn't have to leave her she would not have been afraid to get close to me. I struggled for words to help me understand, to bring us closer together.

I pulled up in front her house and ran around to help her dad out of my car. I joked with him

about going rollerblading later and tried to imagine how hot his knee brace must have been in late August. We walked up to the front porch and I let myself in like I always did, hoping she wouldn't be home.

"Mom?!?" I called out in the big empty foyer.

"Son!" I heard the reply from up the stairs, "how was your last day of work?"

"Nightmare," I yelled as I ran up the stairs. "I've never answered more angry phone calls in my life. It's like they knew I was leaving soon." I sat down next to her mom in the den and made sure that she wasn't going to be home until late that night. I didn't want to have to put on the act after such a long day.

"I'm so sad that I'm losing my only son," her mom said in the teariest voice she could manage. "Here, I got you a going away present." She handed me a tiny wrapped box.

"You do too much for me," I protested as I hugged her. "Getting me a job with Dad was the only present I needed."

I opened the carefully ribboned package and pulled out the tiny kaleidoscope. 'This is to give you another way to see the world...' said the note she had written inside. And for a moment while I held it to my eye and looked around the den I could see the world that had been familiar to me, I could feel our souls touching again, and my heart beat fast and strong. As I slowly pulled it away, I looked at her mom and smiled.

"It's beautiful," I said.